



MySafe:LA Podcast

Fire and Life Safety Education

Our mission: providing children, families, and seniors in Los Angeles with life-saving education, resources, and benefits.

Episode 8

Retired LAFD Captain Steven Owens

Todd Leitz: You're listening to a special edition of MySafe:LA's Fire and Life Safety podcast, Remembering the Northridge Earthquake 20 years later.

Thank you for joining us for this latest in our series of special MySafe:LA Fire and Life safety podcast, Remembering the Northridge Earthquake 20 years later. My name is Todd Leitz. I'm the public information officer for MySafe:LA. We're the public education partner of the Los Angeles Fire Department and I'm joined right now by Steven Owens who's a retired LAFD fire captain. He was stationed at Fire Station 76 in the Cahuenga Pass in Hollywood Hills ... A 32-year veteran who just recently retired and is actually on the Board of MySafe:LA. He's a great friend to us and thank you for joining us, Steve.

Steven Owens: Thank you for having me here, Todd. It's a pleasure to be here and I appreciate you giving me the opportunity to come and address our fine folks.

Todd Leitz: This is a very important topic, obviously. Twenty years ago this week ... We're actually a day before the earthquake hit right now as we record this. Cap, you were actually in quarters when the earthquake hit. Like a lot of folks, 4:31 in the morning on January 17th, 1994, you were in bed and you were literally jolted out of your bunk, weren't you?

Steven Owens: That is correct. I remember that day very vividly. I was just ending my shift, my 24-hour shift and I was due to get off duty within the next couple of hours. As I was asleep in bed, the earthquake struck which was pretty violent at the time and almost literally threw me out of the bed.

Todd Leitz: What was your first move when the quake hit? Did you realize what was going on?

Steven Owens: Yes sir, immediately I knew exactly what was happening. Of course my first thought was to make sure that I wasn't injured in the process while the quake was active. The first thing I'm looking for is, how do I protect myself. You think about the drop cover ... Our hold-on policy. We thought that at the same. In my room, unfortunately, there was nowhere to go. I just basically stayed where I was because there was nothing that was going to fall on me at that location.

I will tell you one thing that did concern me was because it was shaking so good, I actually thought and have understood that in some times, houses and structures can shift and doorways can get stuck ... Things like that. I know that I had the ... And this was prior to us having the earthquake shut-off valve on our gas line that was coming into the fire station. I thought about that gas line rupturing and then I thought about what if my door gets stuck and then there's a fire. I've got to start thinking a little bit about how I'm going to get out of here once the shaking stops.

Todd Leitz: Once you guys got yourselves together and I'm sure everybody was wide awake ... Did you guys get a call on the radio to go out and start to survey damage or did you have an emergency call that you had to respond to?

Steven Owens: What our normal procedure is that when we do have an earthquake, everybody's going to take care to make sure they're not injured but we will get a long ring, if possible, if the system is still up that our dispatch center will send out the message that we are in what we call "emergency earthquake mode." Even if that were not to happen, our normal procedure is that once we feel the earthquake, we automatically go into that whether we get an official notification or not.

Once the shaking stopped, then, of course, we all got together in our designated place, quick survey of the station, got all the equipment out of the station just in case that there was another tremor, we wanted to free all of the apparatus and the equipment so that we would be able to respond in emergencies that needed to be taken care of.

Todd Leitz: That's a really good point because at the time, we didn't really know ... Some of us who kind of understood earthquakes, we weren't sure if this was the main jolt or if this was a fore-shock. We knew there would be after-shocks and if a building is in degraded mode, it could be further damaged from that. Fire fighters are always ready to jump out of bed at a moments notice so they've got their boots right next to them. We know that a lot

of folks jumped out of bed and hurt themselves on broken glass and things like that.

What do you remember most about that morning initially when you first ... Once you guys made sure that everything at the firehouse was OK and you guys were all set up to do what you needed to do? What did you see when you first went outside and maybe responded to a call or went out to survey?

Steven Owens: It was kind of surreal because, of course, it was still dark at the time so you really couldn't see very much. At that time of morning, there wasn't a lot of activity as far as traffic or people walking around. It was pretty deserted. It was very quiet. I do remember that. It was very quiet.

As we went out and got all the apparatus out of the station ... Part of our procedure is that once we determine that our personnel are OK, our station is OK and our apparatus has been freed and we're ready to respond, then we have predesignated routes that we actually drive through our districts to make sure that our district is OK or if anybody needs help, that we can get there fairly rapidly. Take into account that different districts are different. In my district, we had a multitude of overpasses from the freeway. We had large condominium complexes. I had a reservoir in my district that could have ruptured. We have high power high transmission lines so we had a myriad of things that could have gone wrong in the district.

Part of our responsibility was to start patrolling to find out where are the problems in our district. That's what we're thinking about is taking care of where we're going to be able to do the most good. One of the biggest things that I was concerned about was I have a family myself and my crew has a family themselves so not only am I concerned about the citizens that we serve but I'm concerned about my own personal family and the family of my crew members who I know are very ... They're very worried about their families as well.

Todd Leitz: Where was your family at the time?

Steven Owens: My family was all at home. I live about an hour away north up in the Antelope Valley so they were quite a ways away. Still, you have no idea if ... Where the epicenter was or were we getting just the residual effect of it and it was actually greater somewhere else or was it the greatest here? You don't know that so until you find out that information ... And that's always in any answer that you go to, there's always a period of time where you

don't have all the information. You just have to wait until that begins to filter in.

Todd Leitz: What was your biggest take away after going through that? It sounds to me from what you're saying that your immediate district that 76 covers wasn't heavily affected by ... There were no overpasses that crumbled to my knowledge.

Steven Owens: Yes, mm-hmm (affirmative).

Todd Leitz: What was the thing that really stuck with you or really hit you that morning like "Oh my goodness. This is a major disaster!"

Steven Owens: Because, as you say ... Because I didn't have any visible catastrophic type of failures like ... And we have many hillside homes in my district ... I didn't have any of those sliding although that did occur. We didn't have that in my district. You saw a couple of chimneys that had fallen down but nothing major. It wasn't long after we had done our district that we have to give a report as to what the general condition of our district is that I was actually ... My company was actually sent to a staging area in the San Fernando Valley because it appeared that they had suffered the brunt of the devastation so they were trying to get as many resources into that area as they could.

Todd Leitz: Yeah. Another interesting point here is that earthquakes strike without warning.

Steven Owens: Yes.

Todd Leitz: This one happened to hit at 4:30 in the morning when most people, most were in bed. It was also a holiday. It was MLK day. You figure that on a normal day with lots of people at work and traffic going on, the situation could have been quite a bit different. In this case, it hit and a lot of people were at home and a lot of the damage was at people's homes. Northridge Meadows Apartment Complex collapsed. Overpasses collapsed down on the 10 Freeway. The Antelope Valley Freeway that you probably would have been driving home on in a few hours, that sky way went down.

Steven Owens: Yes.

Todd Leitz: I believe a motor officer flew right off of that thing during the earthquake.

Steven Owens: That is correct.

Todd Leitz:

It just really drives, to me ... It just drives home the point that they can strike at any moment, at any time and we have to be ready to survive just about anywhere we might be. One could hit right now where we're sitting or they could be in the middle of the night when we're in bed or it could be when we're driving in our car. That's kind of a scary prospect.

Any tips that you have for folks thinking about that type of thing and being ready to survive?

Steven Owens:

I think you hit the nail right on the head, Todd, is that preparedness is the key because we don't know when it will strike. You have to be ready for it when it does and you have to be ready to respond. Not only to think about it but actually be prepared to actually take some kind of action. You mentioned that as far as the fire fighters, we had the shaking and we jump into our boots. I know that me, personally, when I'm at home, I keep shoes by my bed. I keep a flashlight by my bed just in case something like that should happen, I don't have to go looking around for them. I already thought about it.

My family knows that "Hey, this is what we need to do." Take care of yourself but after the initial effects are over, then you're going to have to deal with the aftermath. We have to think about those things before that happens. That was one thing that was of comfort to me while at the period that I didn't know what had happened to my family, was I did know that we had talked about some things that needed to be done should an earthquake strike. What are we going to do to protect ourselves not only during the earthquake but in the aftermath?

They had already been ... Not trained to the point of a fire fighter but we had had our own family training. We had things set up for long term ... Not only for days with water and food and that kind of thing but just immediately ... Live I said, shoes by the bed, flashlight available, everybody having a place that you could meet, knowing how to turn off the gas, knowing how to turn off the electricity, knowing how to turn off the water. Things of that nature because you never know how big it is or to what magnitude you're going to have to respond to an immediate threat.

We were, for instance ... One of the places I responded to that day was the Veterans' Administration Hospital in Sepulveda and when I responded, I only had ... Because the resources were so thin I, as a single engine company with only four people on it ... We went to this huge Veterans' Administration complex having no idea. We just knew that they had a problem.

When we arrived, one of the 6-story buildings had suffered some pretty significant damage and actually it appeared like one of the wings was about to just fall off the thing. All of the hospital staff had most of the people outside. They were standing right next to the building. When I rolled up, of course, I said "Hey, we got to get everybody away from the building," but there were still people inside the building, not to mention that one of the wings or one of the floors was the floor that they had the life support unit on it. They couldn't move but they were still in and things were happening.

There was some flooding going on. Things were being strewn about so we started having to take care of those issues ... Getting the water turned off, getting the electricity turned off and then making arrangements to try to get the people who couldn't move very quickly to coordinate getting them out. All those things happened right now but if you have some idea about what you could face before it happened, it makes a tremendous amount of difference rather than trying to think of all those things at once.

Todd Leitz:

One of the big themes of this year's Great California Shake-Out was fire following earthquake. As a fire fighter who's got quite a bit of experience with fire, talk to us a little bit about what we should think about when it comes to ... OK, so if the jolt doesn't get you but we know gas lines can rupture. We know water heaters can fall over and the gas line can break and things like that. What should folks at home think about for their own safety to avoid a fire following an earthquake?

Steven Owens:

When it hit and I was in my bed at the fire station, that was the first thing that I thought about was ... I was going to have a gas leak and I was going to have a fire and would I be able to get out of here if the door is jammed and you can't. I already formulated ... "Well, you know what? I'm getting out of here some way. Either I'm going to breach this wall or I'm going to do this ..." But I'm thinking about different escape routes. That was something I had already thought about to be honest with you. Should that happen and I can't get out, how am I going to get out. You think about those things.

I think being able to recognize what you can do and what you can't do because sometimes you may want to do something and you may take on a little bit more than is capable for you and you put yourself in a position of danger trying to stop something when it might be beyond.

Some basic things like knowing how to turn off your gas should you have a fire.

Having fire extinguishers available because you may not have water. You say "I'll just get the water and I'll put the fire out." Well, the water mains may be damaged. You may not have any water. Have a fire extinguisher there. A multi-purpose fire extinguisher and know how to use it so that in case you do need to just quickly be able to subdue ... Maybe not even put it out all of the way but at least knock it down enough so that if somebody needs to get out of the place, that you can. That's the most important thing is to preserve the life first and then to worry about the property subsequent to that.

Todd Leitz: Excellent point. You mentioned that you've got to know your limitations. Is there ... A lot of folks that don't have experience with fires might not know when a fire has grown to a stage where, "You know what? This is a little too big for me and obviously my own life and the safety of my family comes first." Is there a paradigm for you that says, "OK, this particular fire is too big for any person to handle with a fire extinguisher or a little hose?"

Steven Owens: Unfortunately, no there is no real gauge that you could look at and say in every situation, either this is too much of this ... It's not too much. I just think as you are preparing and you're looking at what you need to do I think you kind of start to get to a place where you're comfortable or you're uncomfortable. I think we all have certain things that are innate within us when we start to do things. You get feelings about things a lot of times that "Eew, this is not good." You may not know nothing but you know this is not good. Sometimes you'll get those feelings. Depending on what's going on and if you have a loved one that's right there, sometimes you override that and say "I know it's not good, but I got to get them out of there."

If it's something where someone's life is not threatened and we know that our homes are precious to us, we know we have valuable documents, but if the fire is getting to a point where it's so big and that's something where ... When you look at a fire and it's not very big, I think everybody has a pretty general idea of "Hey, I can use a fire extinguisher." Once it starts really getting out of control and you begin to feel the heat, you aren't going to be able to get very close it.

Don't get yourself in a position where you get trapped trying to put out a fire then you can't get out. The fire overwhelms whatever resource you have. Your little extinguisher doesn't work

or you use it all up. The fire is still going and now your escape route has been compromised. Now you're trapped in there. You would hate to become a casualty of trying to save your house because it's not worth that.

It's worth getting all the people out and if you can do something safely, particularly in this case because you may not get any help for a while. I know your home is your home and everybody loves their home but it's not worth losing your life over.

Todd Leitz: That's very well said, sir. Back then ... 20 years ago when the Northridge earthquake hit, a lot of us didn't know that we needed to shut off our gas valves. We had to think about that kind of thing. I also know that some people in some small earthquakes did shut off their gas valves and then they couldn't get the gas company back out there to turn them back on for weeks. Is there a point at which you must turn off your gas valve?

Steven Owens: These days we have the earthquake shut-off valves. They'll shut them off automatically for you but you do want to make sure that the valve is shut off. If you do shut it off, don't turn it back on because now when you turn it back on, you don't know to what extent there is some damage along the line where you may have a leak. You would hate to have an incident after everything is said and done. Everybody is safe. The house is safe. Everything is OK and then you go turn the gas back on and there's a leak that you don't know about. All of a sudden it hits an ignition source. You burn your house down and this is after the earthquake and everything is safe.

Once you actually ... If you have to turn it off and it's a good idea to do that, particularly in a significant event. If you do turn it off, just be patient and allow the professionals to come in to turn it back on for you. Most people don't realize that there are pilots in their stoves and in hot water heaters. When you do turn it back on, if you don't know what you're doing and all the places that the gas can escape, even places that you might not see ... Underground, in the walls where there may have been a rupture of your line that you're not aware of, that could present a problem for you.

Todd Leitz: Yeah, especially up in your attic or crawl space where you've got a forced air heater or something like that with a pilot light.

Steven Owens: Yes sir.

Todd Leitz: All excellent points. Capt. Owens, if you had one message that you wanted to put out to the people of Los Angeles and Southern California ... This is earthquake country, after all.

Steven Owens: Yes, mm-hmm (affirmative).

Todd Leitz: 97% chance that a major damaging earthquake is going to hit within the next 30 years. Hopefully that's within our lifetime, right? Hopefully we live that long but most young people haven't even experienced a major damaging earthquake. If you're under 20, you don't even remember anything but a little tremor basically. What would be the message from you, from your experience, your perspective as a long-time fire fighter? What would you tell folks?

Steven Owens: I would say that recalling back in the '71 earthquake of Sylmar, I wasn't even on the Fire Department. I was actually still in school. When that struck, I remember that I had no idea what was going on. Had never even thought about earthquakes at that time. Since then it's been about educating myself and being prepared.

I think what ... Your point is very valid that the longer we go without an earthquake occurring, that the more comfortable we get ... Maybe a little more complacent that we get. I would say what you're saying is absolutely correct that it is going to happen. Not if it's going to happen. It will happen. We have to keep our awareness level and our preparedness level and our thought level to that level that it will occur and we have to be prepared for not only a minor quake, but a significant earthquake.

In that regard, make sure that we've done all the things that we can do to handle not only the earthquake itself but the disaster that will occur after the earthquake. Please don't forget that. You've got to be able to take care of yourself because you may not get the help that you're accustomed to getting in normal times. When you pick up and dial 911, the Fire Department or Police Department are there almost instantaneously. That may not occur.

You may be on your own so you need to be prepared to deal with that and also to think about the community in which you live that we want to have the thought that I'm concerned about my family but I'm also concerned about my fellow man.

Todd Leitz: Thank you so much for your perspective and your expertise. Retired LAFD Fire Captain Steve Owens. Steve O., really appreciate your insight here today.

You've been listening to a MySafe:LA special podcast Fire and Life Safety. We're remembering Northridge Earthquake, 20 years. I think it's incumbent upon all of us who lived through that difficult day and the aftermath to make sure that we let folks know that it can and it will happen here once again.

Stay tuned for another in this ongoing series of MySafe:LA Fire and Life Safety podcasts, Remembering Northridge Earthquake 20 years ago. I'm Todd Leitz. We'll see you next time.

You've been listening to a MySafe:LA Fire and Life Safety podcast. MySafe:LA is the public education partner of the Los Angeles Fire Department. Visit us at MySafe:LA.org and LAFD.org.